

An Elephant in the room called overpopulation

Several movements around the world, like the degrowth movement in Europe and the Buen vivir movement in Latin America are questioning the capitalistic model of eternal growth. Reducing our ecological footprint by reducing consumption seems very obvious, yet it is still very far from being mainstream discourse among politicians or even among environmental organizations. They prefer to focus on protecting certain habitats or species by fencing them, and on finding technological solutions to make production processes cleaner so that we can continue with business as usual with a clear conscience. But there is still another factor in the equation: population. Our ecological footprint is a product of consumption versus population, and only reducing consumption without reducing population, will not solve the problem in the long run.

The Earth's Carrying capacity and overpopulation

After Malthus' warning two centuries ago, there was a renewed anxiety about population explosion in the 1960s, especially in developed countries. This concern was not limited to a small idealistic group. In 1969, president Nixon warned congress that the domestic pressure of 200 million Americans was threatening democracy, education, privacy, living space, natural resources and the quality of the environment (Coole, 2012). But by the mid 1970s talking about population control had disappeared from the political agenda and by the mid 1990s it had practically become a taboo (Coole, 2012).

In the past years rapid population growth is more and more being mentioned as a driver for urban unrest and environmental impacts. In his book *Collapse*, Diamond for example argues that the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, which is largely described as an ethnic conflict between Hutus and Tutsis, was largely caused by overpopulation (Diamond). One can also interpret many recent expressions of public disquiet, from the Arab spring to the Occupy movement as a diffuse response to overpopulation. These movements have called for more democracy, but Bartlett argues that democracy inevitably declines with increasing population (Bartlett).

The population taboo

Population has more than doubled since 1960, when it was about 3 billion. It seems self evident that more people require more resources, thus increasing the ecological footprint. So while the problem seems to have increased, so has the silence around the issue. And it has been notably profound in developed countries, where each new child has a far larger footprint than in developing countries. In an article questioning if we can talk about population, Coole wonders why the debate has died. She identifies five categories in silencing the population discourse: population-shaming; population-scepticism; population-declinism; population-decomposing and population-fatalism (Coole, 2012):

Population-shaming takes its roots in third world suspicions about first world motives to control population. It is perceived as meant to limit certain categories of people who are deemed undesirable, with allusions to racism, genocide and eugenics. Among European populations it reflects in the fear of "race suicide", a fear that population control will cause the white race to disappear.

Population-skepticism doubts that there is a true problem, as fertility rates are already declining. It points to UN projections that indicate population stabilization of around 10 billion in 2100. But

scepticism is also employed by neo-liberals as they need population growth, both as workforce and as consumers, to obtain economic growth.

Population-declinism expresses concerns over low fertility rates which lead to aging societies. Different from the skeptics, it advocates interventionist policies like tax breaks and social benefits to increase birth rates, as well as promoting immigration.

Population-decomposing is about the disintegration of the population discourse in terms of global demographic trends, into a discussion about individuals and families. This trend grew in the 1980s, as the practice of planning and managing a population got more associated with practices of communist countries like China. The critique on population programs that implemented targets and sanctions has led to a reframing of the population debate, focusing on the empowering of women. Another aspect that contributes to this view is that in large modern cities, which mainly thrive on a service economy, it is easy to ignore and be unaware of the environmental impact of its inhabitants.

Population-fatalism sees population growth as a given, about which nothing can be done. Instead it focuses on mitigating the impacts and generally believes that the challenges of a growing population can be met. An example of this are the extensive discussions at UN level on tackling climate change, where tackling population growth is never discussed. Or a report from Friends of the Earth entitled “Hungry Futures” where population growth is mentioned as a driver for land grabbing, but the solution seems to lie in convincing your bank not to take part in these activities (Friends of the Earth, 2012).

Is any of the above a good reason to dismiss the debate?

Population **shaming** recalls bad examples from the past of population control policies and basically argues that future attempts can also only but be bad. It does however not deny the problem, and fails to question whether not doing anything wont be worse.

Population **skeptics** like to trust the UN projections of a levelling population by 2100. However, projections are not predictions. They contain the spirit and wishes of the projector, and this projection is based on the European experience of falling fertility rates. But if worldwide 2005-2010 fertility rates remain, there will not be 10 but 27 billion people by 2100. The only reason why this number will probably not be reached is because by then so many of earths resources will have been depleted, including oil, that there is no way the earth can sustain 27 billion people.

The **declinist** have a very shortsighted view of the economy. With increased technology there is no need to have ever more people to take care of the older generations. If they don't think of alternatives, they will get stuck in an ever growing demand for people, until they run out of resources to sustain them.

The **decomposing** strategy was called by Ehrlich an irresponsible wave of political correctness. Not to dismiss the importance of empowering women, but if large scale policies are not implemented, fertility rates will drop but very slowly. China's population is 1.3 billion and despite the government's one child policy, it is still growing at an annual rate of 0.6% (Pimentel 2010).

The fatalists see the problem, but are too afraid to discuss it. They think that is you work hard enough on reducing consumption, the overall ecological footprint will also decrease. But if we want to live within earths limits, this will imply very serious reductions in consumption, which will most likely be perceived as much more negative than population control policies.

The right to procreate

The right to have as many children as one pleases is often perceived as an individual freedom. It is however an 'other-regarding' act, as J.S. Mill called it. Its an act that significantly affects other people's

interest and limits their rights and freedoms (Coole, 2012). The question is not how many people can live on earth, but how many should, not whether procreation is sustainable but whether it is just (Dillard). Lock, who provided the foundation for today's conceptions of fundamental rights, did consider procreation as one of the basic civil rights of man. But for him the basis of this right is the procreation of the species. It is not an unfettered right to procreate and he places other rights like the right to life, liberty, health and property above it. Locke actually perceived population growth itself as a threat to natural rights and hence to the public good, one of the few views he shared with Thomas Hobbes (Dillard).

In a study about the earths carrying capacity, Pimentel estimates that in about a 100 year, when fossil fuels will have run out, the earth might be able to sustain a population of 2 billion (Pimentel 2010). This is based on a European standard of living for everyone and the sustainable use of natural resources. It would mean 0.5 ha of cropland per capita, 1.5ha of land for renewable energy production and 1 ha for forest and pasture production. Dedicating 1.5 ha of land per capita to the production of renewable energy, means setting aside around 20% of the earths total surface, which is already of great impact on the resilience of ecosystems.

What should be done?

If the whole world would adopt a policy of only two children per couple, it would still take more than 100 years before the world population would stabilize around 13 billion. A more daunting projections is that if fertility remains at present levels, world population will reach 13 billion by 2050. Even with the United Nation's projection of declining fertility rates, population would still reach 9 billion by 2050. Only if a one child policy is adopted can a transition be made to a population of about 2 billion in around 100 years (Pimentel, 2010). A rapid population reduction will cause social, economic and political problems. However, continued population growth will undoubtedly result in major starvations and disease outbreaks, panics and war.

Almost all European countries currently pay child benefits. This was originally envisages to eradicate child poverty, but circumstantial evidence and logic suggest that higher fertility rates may continue to be driven by these payments (Castle, 2013). One option suggested by Castle is to restrict child benefits to only the first two children. This would nevertheless require extra measures to avoid child poverty from increasing, when more than two children exist. A second option is the gradual removal of all child benefits. Poor families could instead be aided by other provisions, like free schooling or baby food vouchers. A third option is the introduction of a personal tax allowance for childless women and/or those with no more than two children.

Ignoring the population issue means denying future generations the right to a good standard of living.

We at least need to talk about it, and discuss acceptable policies.

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